



ועידת התביעות
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Conference on Jewish Material Claims
Against Germany

Claims Conference Holocaust Survivor Memoir Collection

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January 21, 1986

My dearest adult children,

This is the first in a long series of letters, the purpose of which is to tell you the story of my life. The letters will come irregularly, as the mood strikes me, and I have no idea how many it will be. A number of things have given me the idea to write these letters.

Obviously, there is Opa, about whom I don't know enough, and who is now beyond communicating. Then there is the fact that I've led an interesting life -- too interesting at times -- and that I am not likely to tell you all of it in casual, occasional conversation.

Finally, there is the uncertainty of human memory. Writing things down will force me to remember, and to explore the strengths and weaknesses of that amazing, and unreliable, data retrieval system. *A la recherche*... My memory, for instance, seems very idiosyncratic to me. I have no recollection of some momentous things that have happened to me, yet I remember insignificant little events or scenes. For instance, I remember someone in my class at the Jewish High School in German-occupied Amsterdam reading an essay he had written, entitled "Als forensje." "Forens" is the Dutch word for commuter; "-je" is a diminutive ending. I don't remember the boy's name, nor anything else about that truly insignificant little scene, and yet I can still hear the fellow say "Als forensje," with the emphasis on the diminutive. So much for the introduction.



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I was born in 1928 in Berlin. My father was not present at my birth. I am told, in fact, that he was nowhere to be found. I have never asked him where he was at the time, but his absence had absolutely no effect on our "bonding." Opa was the fifth son, the baby, of a middle-class, German-jewish family. Both of his parents were dead by the time I was born, so I can tell you only hear-say about them. Opa's father -- my Opa -- was a big man and an intense German nationalist. He served in the Prussian army in the war against France in 1870-71. I believe he was a cook. He was in the clothing business. I am not sure what he did, exactly, but I guess that he was a salesman most of his life. My Oma's maiden name was Dorothea Prenzlau. She came from Lubeck, and was beautiful but not excessively bright. Opa's brothers were gifted, especially where music is concerned, but none achieved success in life. All are now dead. The Sussmanns were not a particularly cohesive family, and I never got to know any of my uncles on my father's side. In fact I only met one of them, Kurt, and that very briefly and rather late in life (I was in my thirties). After their marriage, my father really adopted my mother's family, and that was the only "mispoche" we were close to.

Oma is the product of what was then considered a "mixed marriage." Her father was an "Ostjude" -- a jew from the east -- and her mother was german. My Opa on my mother's side came from Tarnow in Galicia, which was part of Austria when he was born, but has been part of Poland since World War I. His family, the Maschlers, were rich and prominent in the jewish community there. I am even told that they had their own synagogue. The wealth was dissipated by my great-grandfather, though, or perhaps even

earlier, and my Opa was poor and lazy. As I understand it, he spent most of his life playing cards and yakking. He was very good at both. None of his children respected or even like him. Yet my mother was inconsolable when he died in Berlin in 1941 or '42. The beloved center of my mother's family was my Oma, whose maiden name was Frieda Friedlander. The Friedlanders were an old family in Berlin; supposedly they had served Frederick the Great of Prussia. I remember my Oma as energetic, somewhat stern, but very nice. She was deported from Berlin to Theresienstadt in 1942, and died there. We don't know exactly when, nor where she might be buried. My Opa is buried in the Berlin Jewish cemetery, which is now in East Berlin, the capital of communist East Germany.

Although Oma didn't think much of her Polish father, and adored her very German mother, she was not an assimilationist like most German Jews. She became a Zionist at a very early age, was never a German nationalist, and resented the fact that her father would never speak Yiddish, which she would have liked to have learned. In those days, "civilized German citizens of Jewish faith" had nothing but contempt for Yiddish, which they regarded as an inferior dialect of German.

When I was born, we lived on the Hohenzollerndamm, in a nice but unremarkable apartment house. My aunt Hilde and her husband Kurt, whom everyone called "Ulle," lived in the same block, and my grandparents lived across from them. My uncle Kurt was a successful publisher and supported his parents very generously. Supposedly he also

paid for my birth, and probably had something to do with my parents' Essex automobile. Cars were a luxury in the Berlin of 1928, and my father's income was modest.

When my father and mother met, they both worked for a chemical company. I am not quite sure what my father did there; my mother was a multi-lingual (French and English) secretary. She had not been able to finish secondary school, because there wasn't enough money around. I believe she went to work at age 15, and most of her earnings went to the family. Following the example of Kurt and of their cousin Martin Maschler, who had been a successful publisher before Kurt, my parents also went into publishing. At the time of my birth, both were working for the Kiepenheuer Verlag (publishing house). I am not sure what they did, but it involved the distribution of books.

I believe that my first five years were pleasant and easy. I was probably spoiled, not only by my parents, but by the entire family. My favorite uncle was my mother's eldest brother, Arthur, and my favorite aunt was Rita. Arthur, his wife Milia, and their sons Henry and Werner got out of Germany in the late 30's, and ended up in Charleston, South Carolina, after spending some time in Cuba. Arthur and Milia have since died. Henry, as you know, is in Annapolis, Maryland, and Werner is still in Charleston. He is emotionally somewhat disturbed.

I have very few recollections of Berlin. I remember a living room with a piano and a radio on top of that piano. Near the piano was a window that faced the Hohenzollerndamm, a

rather broad avenue. I remember looking out that window one evening, and seeing an S.A. torchlight parade. The brownshirts were singing as they marched. Germans love to sing and march. I have no idea what they were singing, but high on the S.A. hit parade in those days was a romantic German "Lied" called "Wenn das Judenblut vom Messer spritzt" ("When jewish blood squirts from the knife"). So, you see, my parents decided the time had come to leave. I am told that I was also a reason, although a subsidiary one. Apparently I was given to making loud remarks about our new flag, the one with the swastika, and about the ugly brown uniforms of the stormtroopers.

My parents' decision came very early. Hitler had only just been named chancellor by President Hindenburg when we left. At that time, most jews still believed that the whole thing would blow over. Emigration is not an easy step to take. You have to leave everything behind: your family, your memories, your native tongue, the value of much of your education, and the sense that you belong somewhere. I was much too young to be affected by this pulling up of roots, but I am proud of my parents for their early, clear-eyed decision. Of course, we didn't want to go too far. We wanted to see the mispoche regularly, and my grandparents took the waters every summer in Marienbad in Czechoslovakia. So my parents decided to move to Prague. My father went ahead, and my mother and I followed. When the train stopped at the Czech border, the S.S. or the S.A. pulled us off the train. Somehow my mother was able to convince the authorities that we had important connections in Prague, and that we would make it our business to counteract the nasty propaganda that was being spread about the new National Socialist

government of Germany. I have no idea whether they believed my mother, but they let us go, and we crossed the border into Czechoslovakia. I believe it was May, 1933.

Much love --

Daddy

February 11, 1986

Dearest children,

At the end of my last letter, not-quite five-year old Peter had just arrived in Prague.

Unfortunately, my age and the circumstances in which I came made it impossible for me to appreciate Prague. A pity. I now know that it is a great city, with a much longer and richer history than Berlin. It was the old capital of the kingdom of Bohemia, and has been a center of architecture, music and the arts for centuries. If Prague was old, the country of which it had become the capital barely fifteen years before our arrival was brand new.

Czechoslovakia was carved out of the old Austro-Hungarian Empire at the end of World War I. The Czechs were touchy about their new country and about their language. Having been dominated for centuries by the House of Hapsburg, whose imperial court was in Vienna, and whose language was German, the newly independent Czechs had an intense dislike of that language. Those who knew it -- and many did -- wouldn't speak it, and any foreigner who spoke it was in for a rough time. The fact that the foreigner might be a refugee from German persecution didn't help at all. In fact, it could make matters worse, because it gave quite a few Czechs the opportunity to vent their rage at two groups they detested: Germans and Jews. My parents tried to solve the language problem by enrolling me in a Czech school (a kindergarten), but I wouldn't have any of it. Sometimes I wish they had been more forceful, but then again, the move had probably been traumatic enough for me, and the additional burden of being immersed in a difficult new language,

which has no common roots with German, might well have been a bit much. So an English teacher was found. Her name was Maggie, and she came to the house once or twice a week and taught me English. I really have no idea how successful Maggie's efforts were. All I know is that English did not become our everyday language, that we continued to speak German among ourselves, and that I had to wait some twelve years before I would get the opportunity to use English regularly.

Our first apartment was on the outskirts of the city, in an area called Dejvidze (I think). The house was new, and I liked it. I have no recollection of the apartment. We then moved closer to the center of Prague, to Kladskastreet 21. I remember that apartment somewhat, and I especially remember the Czech maid we had there -- Maska -- who was a cook beyond compare. Materially, life was good for us in Prague. I don't quite know why, but I imagine that my father got paid in Dutch guilders, which was one of the few strong currencies around in those days, and that labor was cheap in Czechoslovakia. During the five years we spent there, we always had a maid; our clothes, and even my father's shoes, were made to order; and we had a car. Although the Czechs manufactured several makes of automobiles, car ownership wasn't very widespread. Whenever my father came to pick me up from school, he would wait for me around the corner to avoid ostentatious display of our Tatra. That's what we had: a Tatra. First a blue one, with a pointed snout, which looked a bit like those ancient taxis the French used in 1914 to ferry their troops to the front in a desperate but successful effort to stop the Germans from reaching Paris. The Tattras were aircooled and very noisy, but, from my five-year old perspective, absolutely

splendid. After a couple of years, we traded the blue Tatra in for a newer model, also a convertible, which was beige.

Aside from material comfort, though, life in Prague was difficult. Clearly, it was not a place in which we would be able to stay in the long run, but I don't believe that my parents had much of an idea where we might go next. Nazi Germany was young, and I guess that many people still hoped that it might prove to be a passing nightmare, after which we could all go home. I rather doubt that my parents harbored that illusion. Yet our family was still in Berlin, frequent get-togethers in Marienbad were still possible, and I guess my parents didn't want to lose that contact. In those days, a move overseas would have been pretty irrevocable. Until the late 1930's there was no transatlantic air service, and when it came, it was a clipper service from Lisbon to New York, and it was as exotic as it was expensive. Most of the passenger traffic was carried by oceanliners, which took about five days to make the crossing, and which were also expensive. So a move to America, or to Australia or South Africa, meant saying goodbye forever, or at least for a very long time. Those, I believe, were the theoretical considerations; the practical considerations had to do with passports and visas. In the 1930's, national boundaries looked to us like virtually insurmountable obstacles. There was a depression on, and nobody wanted immigrants. Visas were extremely hard to get, especially for us, because German jews had become semi-stateless. Eventually, Germany deprived all of its jewish citizens of their German nationality and thus actually made them stateless, but during our Prague period we were still Germans. Our passports, however, were marked with a great, big letter "J," to indicate that we were not really entitled to the "benefits" of German

citizenship. The "J" also appealed to the latent anti-semitism outside Germany, and signaled to the immigration authorities of other countries that once they admitted the bearer of such a passport for more than a brief visit they might be stuck with him, since he was probably unable and unwilling to return to the country of his ostensible nationality. The question, therefore, was not so much where we wanted to go, but where we might be able to go.

The passport question had another aspect. My father made his living as a salesman of books that were banned in the Third Reich. His customers were in Austria, Switzerland, and, to a lesser degree, in other European countries where German books were sold. This meant, of course, that he had to travel regularly, which required a valid passport. Apparently, passports had short periods of validity in those days, because I remember that my poor father had to apply to the German consulate quite regularly to have his passport renewed. Surprisingly enough, the renewals always came through. Sometimes, however, there were unexplained delays, and then my father was grounded. I remember one instance when my mother, whose passport was in order at that juncture, took over and went to visit my father's customers in Switzerland. My father carefully prepared a notebook listing the location and peculiarities of each customer, and my mother went off and made the calls -- quite successfully, I believe. My father's passport extension must have come through while my mother was in Switzerland, because, as I recall, my father and I met her in Vienna on her way back to Prague.

In any event, it was a world in which the right passport was strong magic -- like an asbestos suit in hell (assume asbestos to have the meaning it had in the 30's, not in the 80's). A British or American passport was regarded with profound awe.

As to my life in Prague, it must have been extremely lonely, but if I suffered from that, I don't remember. Except for Andreas Lowenfeld I had no friends, I believe. Andreas was a couple of years younger than I. He was the precocious only child of two psychiatrists, neither of whom was allowed to practice in Czechoslovakia (they were German-jewish refugees, like us). Andreas and I spent a lot of time together, but I don't remember how we passed the time, or what sort of child he was. I rather think he was funny, but having met him again, many years later in the U.S., I'm not so sure. The Lowenfelds got away to America in about 1937, dropped their Umlaut and flourished. They helped us immigrate into the U.S. in '45 by providing the then necessary affidavit of support, but we didn't see much of them after that initial welcome. They did arrange for me to go to a private high school -- Walden -- from '45 to '47, because they thought that it would probably have been unkind and unwise to dump me straight into a public high school in New York. I don't believe that the Lowenfelds paid my tuition. My recollection is that Walden gave me a scholarship. Andreas went on to become an international lawyer of some renown. He was deputy legal adviser to the Secretary of State in the Kennedy administration, and is now a professor at N.Y.U. law school.

Aside from Andreas, I remember not a single child from my five years in Prague. At the outset, of course, I was very young, but by the time we left I was almost ten. Obviously I knew other children, but it seems pretty clear that none became my friends. I started elementary school in '34. My mother tried very hard to get me admitted to the English school or the French school, but because we didn't belong to the anglophone or francophone communities, she wasn't successful. I ended up in a German school, which must have been awful, because, with the exception of one minor incident, I recall absolutely nothing. I couldn't tell you where the school was, what it looked like, or who any of my teachers or fellow-students were.

The one incident I remember concerned a piece of paper or some other small, out-of-place object, which, unbeknownst to me, was on the floor next to my schoolbench. We were all sitting there, quiet, orderly, and intimidated as becomes a class of little German-speaking children, and the teacher was walking down the aisle. I suppose it was in second or third grade. The teacher spotted the offending object, and felt it necessary to call my attention to it by grabbing my hair and pulling my head down low enough so that I could get a close look at that impertinent, disorderly piece of paper. And that's all I remember of my first four school years and of the only German-language formal education I've ever had (other than a few German literature courses in college in the U.S.).

Much love -- D.

April, 8, 1986

Dearest children,

We are still in Prague. As I told you, my memory of those years is vague, but I have retained impressions. I am not sure how Oma spent her time. There was no housework to be done, because we had a maid. I believe that Oma started her volunteer work in Prague, helping refugees. She was also very active in the zionist movement. I remember some of her "chawers" [?] (comrades) in that movement, particularly her good friend Jacob Edelstein, who will reappear in my story later on. I was also involved in zionist activities, as a member of a youth group called "techelet lavan," or blue white. I have since learned that that was actually a German zionist movement, originally called "blau weiss," but I only knew it by its Hebrew name. We learned about Palestine, and vaguely prepared ourselves to become farmers. I think I liked it, but I was never very serious about becoming a farmer. I don't remember whether I ever really wanted to go to Palestine.

I do remember 1935. That was the year of our "great voyage" -- "die grosse Reise." I was not quite seven at the time, and "die grosse Reise" was a major event in my life. I even remember the months of anticipation before we set out in early summer in our Tatra. We drove from Prague to Vienna, and then by way of Salzburg to Zurich. I was particularly fascinated by the borders, and would get out of the car to walk across the no-man's land separating one country from another. From Zurich, we continued on into France, stopping

in Strasbourg, I believe, and ending up in Paris. I am afraid I was too young for Paris, and found it pretty boring, except for the traffic around the Arc de Triomphe. We then drove to the Belgian coast, and spent some time at the seaside resort of Knokke. After that we went to Amsterdam and Zandvoort in Holland, and then all the way back to Prague. It was a great trip, although I really wasn't ready for it.

A couple of years later we moved into a new apartment in a brand new building on Mala Vinarska (no. 6). Our apartment was a typical Sussman affair. It was a sort of penthouse, with large terraces, both front and rear; large, beautiful, sunny rooms; a modern kitchen with a refrigerator (quite something in Prague in ca. '37); and a maid's room behind the kitchen. but we had only two rooms for ourselves. One was the living/dining room, which also doubled as my bedroom. The other was my parents' bedroom. A crazy setup, but I enjoyed it.

Late in 1937, I caught diphtheria, one of the very few serious diseases I ever had. I was nursed back to health with loving care, after which Oma decided to take me to Vienna to recuperate. By that time, Uncle Kurt had left Berlin, and had established himself with his family in a large, splendid house in Vienna. That's where we stayed. I remember spacious, bright rooms, and a sort of tower, on top of which there was an observatory. Under the observatory was the Maschler's bedroom, which was round. I have favorable memories of Rita and unfavorable, but vague, memories of my spoiled cousin Tom, then about four or five. The political atmosphere, which was tense and threatening, permeated everything (it

was February 1938). Uncle Kurt was extremely nervous, and determined to be constantly informed of the latest disasters. He had acquired a portable radio, on which he would listen to the news and to Hitler's speeches. Nobody in the house except Kurt was sufficiently curious about the gathering storm to be able to tolerate the rasping, screaming voice of the Austrian corporal Schickelgruber. So Kurt would pick up the Fuhrer's disembodied voice and carry it into another part of the house.

Although we were successful in shielding ourselves from Hitler's voice, we didn't escape his actions. While we were in Vienna, Hitler summoned Austria's chancellor Schuschnigg to Berchtesgaden. Hitler threatened, screamed, ranted and raved. I guess he told Schuschnigg that his first duty was to the German "Volk," and that he had better give Austria's Nazis (a not inconsiderable element of the Austrian population) free rein. Schuschnigg, who was not exactly a hero, I believe, was sufficiently inspired by the Fuhrer's performance that he went home and tried to defy the Nazis. He planned a plebiscite to show that the Austrian people had no desire to become part of the Nazi Empire. The plebiscite was never held. German troops crossed the border and Austria was annexed to the Reich in what became known as the "Anschluss." On the whole, the Germans were warmly received in Austria.

By that time (March '38), we were back in Prague, but our situation had become very precarious. Look at a map. With Austria closed off to us, it had become almost impossible to get to Western Europe. We had to get out, and we got out with amazing speed. Within

two months, we settled up our affairs, rented our beautiful apartment, completely furnished, to a British correspondent, and fled. That, by the way, was the end of my piano lessons, which had only just started. The piano stayed in Prague.

Since we couldn't travel through Germany, and it had become so difficult to get around that country, we flew. Another great adventure! Somehow, my father had gone ahead, so it was just my mother and myself. We flew on a DC-3 of Czechoslovak Airlines, and my mother was scared to death. The least that would happen to us, she thought, was an emergency landing in Germany, leaving us in the hands of the Nazis. None of that happened, of course, but we did get airsick. Those little planes bounced around quite a bit. We landed in Rotterdam, and then flew on to Amsterdam in a DC-2. I've never met anyone else who has flown in a DC-2. I don't think there were many. Of course, flight time from Rotterdam to Amsterdam must have been negligible, even in so ancient a plane.

And so, in May 1938, we started a new life in Holland. I liked the country from the start. The dutch, unlike the Czechs, had no chips on their shoulders. Theirs was a well established, perhaps even smug nation, where I could easily imagine myself feeling at home, a feeling I had never had in Czechoslovakia. The language didn't seem much of a barrier to me, and anti-semitism was almost non-existent (not completely, of course -- there was a Dutch Nazi party).

We started out in a pension on Beethoven street. There were many pensions in Europe in those days, usually run by refugees for refugees. We had a bed-sitting room and had communal meals. Obviously the bathrooms were communal, too. My adaptation to Dutch life started with the purchase of a good, plain, black Dutch bicycle, for which I paid with the savings I had brought with me. That bicycle gave me more pleasure and a greater sense of freedom than any car ever did in later years.

In the summer of '38, I went to an "overgangscursus," a "transition course," which was designed to teach refugee children Dutch, and did just that very rapidly and very effectively. No bilingual education nonsense there. By the fall, I was ready for Dutch school, but finding the right school proved difficult. I remember being dragged through various schools, including a Jewish one, all of which I detested. Then my mother found the Dalton school and got me in there, even though she was at first told that the school's educational program was sort of a seamless whole, in which you either participated from beginning to end or not at all. Oma persisted and prevailed.

The Dalton School was marvelous. It had a remarkably successful mixture of innovation and tradition. There were no schoolbenches; we sat on chairs, grouped around tables. We were given weekly tasks, at which we could work at our own speeds, provided they were done by the end of the week. If you finished your task early, you could work at a project of your own choosing. French and chess were taught, although optional. Cursive writing was out. [Everybody had to write like this.] Linking of letters was not permitted until the

last year in elementary school (6th grade). I have no idea what my handwriting was like before the Dalton School, but, clearly, the way I write today goes back to that school.

Our teacher was a Miss (Juffrouw) Fanoy, a descendant of French Huguenot immigrants to Holland. She was demanding, supportive, and all those good things one always hears about but hardly ever finds in our schools. The kids were nice, but of course I was the new boy on the block, and initially lonely. Good old Oma decided I needed a friend, and went to the school principal to request (demand?) that a friend be found for me. The principal produced Charles (then Kurt) Silberstein. Amazingly enough, Oma's intervention did not backfire: Charles and I became very good friends. We enlarged the circle by the addition of Herman Schpektor and Freddie Schumer, and ended up with a very compatible group. Charles was, like me, a German-Jewish refugee from Berlin. Herman and Freddie were Dutch-born of Eastern European Jewish parents. We all survived, but Charles and I have lost contact with Herman, who is still in Holland, and Freddie, who is in Brazil.

So by 1939 I was well established in Amsterdam, and happy as a clam. I believe that my parents were not quite as happy. They liked Holland, but the world situation was getting worse and worse. Hitler had grabbed first the Sudetenland (the German-speaking part of Czechoslovakia) and then most of the rest of Czechoslovakia, including Prague. We registered with the U.S. consulate in Rotterdam, joining the long list of people waiting for a U.S. visa. In September, the Germans attacked Poland, and World War II broke out.

Holland declared its neutrality, as it had done successfully in World War I. For the moments, we seemed to be safe.

Much love,

D.

May 15, 1986

Dearest children --

So WWII had broken out. As far as we were concerned, it was long overdue. For six years Hitler had ranted, raved, threatened, and generally carried on like a murderous lunatic on a rampage, and the world stood by and treated him with respect and deference. It seemed as if no one could or wanted to stop him. At last, then, there was a war, a declaration on the part of what we hoped was the civilized world that its tolerance and patience were at an end. We waited in fear and trembling, but also with much hope, for the great explosion.

Initially, nothing happened -- at least in Western Europe. It was the "Sitzkrieg," the "drole de guerre"; there was no fighting on the western front. All the preparation for air raids seemed pointless, because there were no air raids. In the meantime, of course, the Germans were destroying Poland, but that seemed far away. Somehow, the Dutch seemed more concerned about the fate of Finland, which was heroically fending off the Soviet army. I remember model Finnish ski soldiers being sold, with the proceeds going to Finnish relief. I bought, or was given, one of those. The Russians, of course, had joined the bad guys when they signed a non-aggression pact with Germany in 1939 and then proceeded to gobble up half of Poland.

Life in Holland continued pretty much on an even keel. I have no idea what my father did. Clearly, he couldn't travel any more, and I don't believe that Querido Publishers had anything for him to do in Holland. My mother was busy as a volunteer for the Jewish Refugee Committee. She must have worked pretty regularly, because I remember that we used a service that brought cooked food to the house at dinnertime. We lived in a small but delightful apartment on Brahmsstreet, just across the street from my friend Herman. At some point before May 1940 we moved to the Stadionweg, just a block away.

In early 1940, the war came closer. The Germans occupied Denmark and Norway. Denmark didn't resist, but Norway did. It didn't help. Although the Germans had to cross a body of water to get to Norway, the mighty British Navy proved unable to stop them. The power of airplanes was beginning to make itself felt. Things looked ominous.

Then, very early in the morning of May 19, 1940, we were awakened by planes and anti-aircraft fire. My parents thought it might be just Dutch military exercises. I, being all of eleven years old, said no, this was the real thing. We turned on the radio to find out what the BBC was saying. The BBC announcer was talking in a languid voice about Iceland. Nevertheless, I was right -- the war had reached us. Our neighbors across the street spread a huge American flag over the roof of their house (the U.S. was still neutral). There was no need: Amsterdam wasn't bombed.

Initially, we hoped that the Allies might come to the rescue, and that the Germans would never reach Amsterdam. We believed in silly things like the theory that the Dutch could stop the Germans by cutting the dikes and flooding the heartland of Holland. The last time that worked, I believe, was when Prince William III of Orange (later also King of England) used it to stop the advance of Louis XIV in the 17th century. The world had changed a little in the meantime. When it became apparent that the German advance was unlikely to be stopped, people (Jews) looked desperately for ways to escape. To do so, one had to get to the coast and find a boat. My friend Charles Silberstein managed that and got to England. Some people approached my father and asked him if he would drive a car they had managed to get to IJmuiden, the nearest port on the coast. My father declined because he didn't have a Dutch driver's license. Driver's license or not, it would have been risky for my parents to be out on the highway, or even on the street. The Germans had dropped parachutists, disguised as civilians, all over Holland. In order to catch these infiltrators, the Dutch police and military were stopping people at random and ordered them to pronounce a few words of Dutch. My parents couldn't have passed that test; they would have been spotted as Germans and arrested.

Finally word came that the Jewish Refugee Committee was organizing a transport to England. We went down to the offices of the committee, and found a large, panicked, disorganized crowd, milling around in front of the building. One of the committee people spotted my mother and asked her to help. She went in and helped to get things organized, while my father and I sat outside on our suitcases and waited. Gradually, the chaos

subsided and the buses for IJmuiden were loaded. Toward evening, the buses left. All aboard made it to England. The Sussmans, however, had missed the bus, and returned home. The atmosphere was grim. The Dutch military were burning their remaining supplies of oil, and the evening sky was full of smoke. The next day, the Germans arrived.

At first it was just the Wehrmacht. The sight of their uniforms was hateful to us, but the individual soldiers were inoffensive. Many of them actually tried to be friendly. Being Germans, of course, they liked to march through the streets of Amsterdam singing. I remember one lady in our "pension" (we had moved again) saying that the singing sounded nice. My mother was outraged. We knew that there could be nothing "nice" about the Germans at that time and place, but not everybody had come to realize that yet.

There were early indications that the Nazis had special plans for Holland. When they arrived, the Dutch government was gone. The army, persuaded largely by the terror bombing of Rotterdam, had surrendered. The queen and her government had fled to England. The Germans filled that vacuum with a new government under a notorious Austrian Nazi by the name of Dr. Seys-Inquart, referred to by those who knew and hated him as Scheiss-Inquart. That new government, supported by the Gestapo and the "Sicherheitsdienst" (security service) gradually tightened its grip on Holland.

Initially, however, life continued almost normally. We moved immediately after the Germans arrived to a "pension" on the Cliostreet. My father was afraid that the Gestapo

would come looking for him because he had been active in the distribution of banned books. Fortunately they didn't bother. A mere change of address wouldn't have done much to throw them off the trail. At some point, later in 1940 or in 1941, we moved again, this time to another "pension" on Albrecht Durerstreet, which was in the same block as my school. I continued to go to the Dalton school until my graduation in 1941. After elementary school, Dutch children in those days could go to any one of a variety of secondary schools, depending on their desires and abilities. There was something called the ULO or MULO, which provided a three-year course to get you ready for the labor market. Then there was the average high school, the HBS, which prepared you for a career in commerce or industry. Then came the "Lyceum," which provided a somewhat streamlined classical education, and finally there was the "Gymnasium," the completely classical preparatory school for university. I made it into the gymnasium, and not only that, but into one of Amsterdam's finest, the Vossius Gymnasium. I was very pleased and proud, as I recall. Then, in the summer of 1941, we got an inquiry from the Board of Education, or whatever its equivalent was in Amsterdam. I had to fill out a card indicating how many Jewish grandparents I had. I wrote "4" in a big, defiant way, and the doors of the Vossius Gymnasium closed. By the fall of '41, the "Joods Lyceum," or Jewish Lyceum, had been established, of which more later.

I am not sure when, and in what sequence, the restrictions were imposed. We couldn't have cars, of course, but that didn't matter much. There were few cars left, and gas was scarce. You couldn't travel by train. You couldn't go to the movies or have a radio.

Theaters and concerts were out, unless the audience, the performers and the playwrights or composers were all Jewish. You couldn't take public transportation of any kind. We were allowed to keep our bicycles until some time in 1942 or '43, when we had to turn them in. We were not allowed to enter non-Jewish shops except between 3 and 5 p.m. There was also a curfew on Jews: we were not allowed outside after 8 p.m. We were not allowed in parks, or to sit on public benches. To the best of my recollection, we were not allowed in restaurants.

In that atmosphere, I had my bar mitzvah in the summer of 1941. For some reason, the ceremony was held in an orthodox synagogue on Lakstreet, in which there was separate seating for men and women. My mother sat upstairs. The outside of the building, which was quite modern, was daubed with anti-semitic slogans. I chanted my piece, and enjoyed my party as best I could.

Some time that summer or fall, we had an amazing visit. My mother's friend Jacob Edelstein, whom I mentioned earlier, and a Mr. Friedmann showed up in Amsterdam. At a time when no Jews were allowed to travel, here were these two Zionist leaders traveling clear across German-occupied Europe, from Prague and Vienna to Amsterdam. I am not entirely certain what the purpose of their trip was, but I believe that they had been charged by the Nazis to help the Dutch Jewish community establish a registration system, so that all Jews in Holland could be registered for "emigration," ostensibly to Palestine. The system worked fine, but no one, or virtually no one, got to Palestine. I am still puzzled by this mysterious visit. Edelstein and Friedmann spent quite a bit of time with

us while they were in Amsterdam. We never saw them again after they left. They were both killed.

Much love --

Daddy.

July 15, 1986

Dearest children --

As you know, David and I went to Zurich right after I wrote you my last letter. While at Oma's place, I picked up a book by Jacob Presser entitled "De Ondergang." It means something like the decline, fall and disappearance, in this case of Dutch jewry. It is a well researched and illustrated history of the fate of the jews in Holland under German occupation. Dr. Presser, who is a university professor unless he is retired, was my history teacher at the Joods Lyceum, and was by far my favorite teacher. I don't remember what it was about his classes, whether content or method, but they enchanted me.

With the help of Dr. Presser's book, I have been able to remember those years a little more clearly. I was right in telling you that nothing much happened in 1940 after the Dutch surrendered. The Germans even indicated to the leaders of the Dutch civil service that they realized that Holland had no "jewish problem," and that they didn't intent to introduce their anti-semitic measures into Holland. Things started gradually, and then sped up. The first measure was the exclusion of jews from the air raid warden service. Ominous as an indication of what was to come, but otherwise completely insignificant. Then came the exclusion from the civil service and the professions. By that time it was 1941. That was also the year, as I told you, of the exclusion of jewish students from the school system. Then came the exclusion from shops, parks, and places of entertainment,

which I have already mentioned. Apparently there were some non-jewish shops that we were not allowed to enter, even between the hours of 3 and 5, such as butcher shops and shops selling fruit and vegetables. Also in 1941, the Germans introduced terror. Reacting to largely imagined jewish resistance, they conducted random street raids and picked up hundreds of young jewish men, whom they shipped to Mauthausen, a concentration camp in Austria. Shortly thereafter postcards arrived at the homes of these young men announcing their deaths. It was clear to us that any kind of resistance, even minor infractions of the German rules, put one at risk of being sent to Mauthausen, from which no one returned. What we didn't know, and perhaps didn't want to know, was that compliance with German orders led to essentially the same end.

In the spring of '42 all jews in Holland were ordered to wear the infamous yellow star: a magen david, printed in black on yellow cloth, with the word "Jood" (Jew) printed in the center of the star in mock Hebrew letters. These abominations were actually sold to us. Not only did we have to pay for them, we had to turn in one textile ration coupon for each one of them (by this time, most things were scarce and rationed in Holland). The stars had to be worn conspicuously on your left breast, and going out without them was a capital offense. These badges achieved one of the German goals: we became very easy to spot, mistreat, and, eventually, to deport. They failed insofar as the Dutch were concerned. The overwhelming majority of the non-jewish Dutch population treated the wearers of these medieval monstrosities with sympathy and kindness. I walked the streets of Amsterdam

with my yellow star from April 1942 until September '43, and did not encounter even a single instance of hostility from the Dutch.

By 1942, any clear-headed individual could have realized what the Germans were up to. They had isolated us from the Dutch community, and the transports to "the East" had begun. The purpose of these transports, it was said, was to put jewish parasites to work where they were needed, i.e. in Germany and Poland. Yet, if they wanted workers, why did they round up the halt, the lame, the ancient, the insane and the very young? With the benefit of hindsight, it is crystal clear that something very sinister was afoot, but we closed our minds and kept hoping. The Germans encouraged that human tendency. Through the official Jewish Weekly, which did their bidding, they spread the word that letters had arrived from Poland, telling of reasonable, even comfortable living conditions for deported jews. Symphony orchestras, playgrounds, parks, etc. It made no sense, but people were looking for hope.

I started going to the Joods Lyceum in the fall of '41. It was housed in a gloomy old building on the Voormalige Stadstimmertuin (literally the Former Carpenters' Garden) near the Amstel River, not far from the elegant Amstel Hotel. It was also close to Amsterdam's old jewish quarter. At the outset, the school was outstanding. Most of the teachers were excellent, and the education that they offered us was at least equal to anything available in the non-jewish schools. There were no electives. Being in the G ("Gymnasium") division, I took algebra, geometry, chemistry, art, geography, history,

Dutch, German, Latin, French, Greek (2nd year), English (3rd year) and, I think, physics. In spite, or perhaps because of our precarious situation, we took learning very seriously. Unlike the student rebels of the '60s, we never thought that what we learned was irrelevant. On the contrary, we thought or hoped that what we learned was perfectly relevant to the real world, but that the nightmare outside our school was not the real world. O, we also had phys. ed., but we were not allowed to engage in any form of sport outside the confines of the building. That pretty well confined us to calisthenics and volleyball (I don't believe we'd ever heard of basketball).

Anne Frank was one of my fellow students at the Joods Lyceum, but I didn't know her. She was in the L (Lyceum) division, which meant that we were never in the same class. Our parents knew each other, and Mr. Otto Frank apparently paid us a visit shortly before the family went underground. According to my mother he told us that he was going to try to get his family to Switzerland. That was the cover story, I think.

I had a girlfriend at the Joods Lyceum. Her name was Elly Kleerekooper, and she was the daughter of our phys. ed. instructor. Our "romance" consisted of cycling to and from school together, and, on rare occasions, visiting briefly at each other's houses for a chaste chat. The Germans deported the Kleerekoopers in June '43, and none of them returned.

As the tempo of deportations picked up, it became more and more difficult to pretend that we were normal students going to a normal school. Just about every day, one would come

to school and find that one's class had shrunk again. Occasionally teachers would disappear, too. The Joods Lyceum carried on until the spring of 1943. When the new schoolyear started in the fall of that year (it would have been my 3rd year at the Joods Lyceum), the school was out of existence. Some of the remaining teachers provided classes in their homes for the tiny remnant of the student body.

By that time, most of Holland's jews had been deported. Initially, it was a bit like the draft. People would get a letter ordering them to report for "Arbeitseinsatz" (labor service) in Germany. Then came the nightly raids, the infamous knock at the door. The "Sicherheitsdienst" or "Grune Polizei," sometimes accompanied by the Dutch police, would sweep through Amsterdam after the eight o'clock jewish curfew, drag people out of their homes and take them to the Jewish Theater, a staging area, from where they would be shipped to Westerbork and thence to points east. These nocturnal raids continued through '42 and September '43. At the same time, however, the Germans introduced "razzias." These were large-scale day-time roundups. An entire part of town would be blocked off, and then the German police would comb through it, house by house, and, with very few exceptions, carry off all the jews they found, directly to the railroad station, where trains for Westerbork were waiting. Left behind were apartments filled with furniture and personal belongings, sometimes a pet. Within a day or two, moving vans would roll up, and the abandoned jewish belongings were collected and shipped off to Germany. The pets, I understand, were somehow disposed of.

Because Oma worked for the Jewish Council, we were deferred from deportation for a while, but such deferments were all temporary and likely to be withdrawn very suddenly and without notice. In the meantime, we kept moving -- partly because we wanted to, but mostly because we were forced to. Although the Germans never established a real ghetto in Amsterdam, they did concentrate the diminishing Jewish population in two neighborhoods. In 1943 (I believe) we ended up in one of those. It was called the Transvaal quarter, and was pretty grim. The houses were primitive, dirty and malodorous. We got a two-room apartment without bath on President Brand Street (all streets in that neighborhood were named after South African boers), which was to be our last home in Holland.

Much love --

Daddy.

A footnote: Some time in '42 we got word that my Opa, my mother's father, had died in Berlin. Although my mother still insists that she never liked her father, she cried. My Opa, your great-grandfather, Benno Maschler, is buried in the Jewish Cemetery in East Berlin.

August 3, 1986

Dearest children,

My last letter took in too much, and went too fast. I'm not ready to leave Amsterdam yet. Those years in a German-occupied Amsterdam were significant and traumatic -- perhaps more traumatic than the camp itself. So...some more memories and impressions, all of them rather vague, unfortunately.

Shortages started soon after the Germans came. The Dutch had stocked up, expecting to remain neutral, but to have difficulties getting supplies, just as had been the case in WWI. The Germans very rapidly shipped all these stocks to Germany. I remember bicycling all over Amsterdam, looking for cigarillos for my father. He liked those little cigars, and I was trying to find something that would please him. He was very depressed, and spent hours drinking Dutch gin with the publisher Landauer, who ran the German-language division of Allert de Lange, a Dutch publishing house. As a publisher of banned German books, Fritz Landauer was, like my father, unemployed and endangered. He died in Bergen-Belsen in '44. My father and Landauer never actually got drunk; they just cheered up a little. I don't recall that my father complained much, or said much. Later, as an employee of the Jewish Council, he was sent to Westerbork to help register the people who were being deported. I don't recall how long he was there, but he did come back. We weren't sure that he would. He looked haggard, and was very sad, but again, he didn't say

much. One day I came home and found my father wearing a dress. He was making plans to go underground -- for all of us to go underground -- but nothing ever came of them.

My mother was better off, because she had her job, helping people. Whether the Jewish Council actually helped anyone is another question, and a hotly debated one, to which I'll come back later. Oma also had the idea that probably saved our lives. Somehow she got wind that people were getting foreign passports, which could be purchased from helpful and/or corrupt consuls in certain foreign countries. My mother sent a veiled message to Munni Gluck, a relative of my aunt Rita's, who lived in Sweden. The message was received and understood, and Munni bought us Ecuadorian passports with money supplied by Uncle Kurt. The passports didn't arrive in Amsterdam for a long time, and what we finally got were photocopies only. I heard later that the Germans intercepted these so-called "courtesy passports," and used them for their spies. Ecuador was at war with Germany, but still, having a foreign nationality offered the hope of some protection. We realized, of course, that the Germans knew damned well that we were not genuine Ecuadorians, but we thought that they might see some advantage in treating us as such.

Life in Amsterdam became bleaker and more threatening by the day. Few bombs fell; we would have welcomed more. Food shortages, however, got more and more severe.

Almost everything was rationed. Meat, butter and eggs were rare, tropical fruits, such as bananas, had disappeared. Still, we did not go hungry. We were not well fed, by any means, but we were not starving. Also unavailable was rubber for bicycle tires and leather

for shoe soles. Undoubtedly lots of other things were unavailable or in short supply, but my memory is not clear enough to tell you about them. It is hard for me to imagine how we spent our time. There was, as I told you, an eight-o'clock curfew for jews. Radios and telephones were not allowed. Even before 8 o'clock, it was difficult to go visiting, since you could only go by foot after the confiscation of our bicycles. I must have walked to school, too, but I don't remember. Whenever I think of going to the Jewish Lyceum, I see myself on my bicycle. Yet that bicycle was taken away about a year before the bastards came to get us. We must have done a lot of reading, I imagine, and I probably spent much of my time on homework.

I told you in my last letter about the "razzias." One of those I remember pretty clearly. It was a Sunday in June '43. It was a nice, sunny day, I believe. We lived in the grim Transvaal quarter I told you about in my last letter. Early in the morning we heard that the Germans had sealed off the neighborhood, and were conducting a house-to-house search for jews, taking away just about every jew they found. Very few, if any, deferment stamps were still valid. People scurried around like mice in a giant trap. I remember going to see my girlfriend Elly and her family. I then returned home, and we packed. We knew the drill: one suitcase and one blanketroll per person, all bearing the owner's name with the middle name of Isaac or Sarah (by German law all jewish males were Isaac and all females Sarah) and the word "Holland." By afternoon, we were sitting in our living room, dressed and ready to go, and then my father, in the only gesture of defiance I can remember, said that just sitting there, totally prepared, just waiting for the Germans, was

ridiculous. We took our coats off and laid our baggage aside. The Germans appeared on our block and emptied it out, but, miraculously, they skipped our house. I don't know why. Someone had put a sign up, warning that there was a serious contagious disease (scarlet fever? smallpox?) in the house, but I doubt that the Germans were taken in by that. Whatever happened, we were saved, and it wasn't merely a reprieve. I am almost certain that our Ecuadorian passports hadn't arrived yet. If the Germans hadn't skipped that house in June '43, we probably wouldn't have survived, because we had no defense against the cattletrain to Auschwitz.

Things were spooky in Amsterdam after the June razzia. There were very few jews left. As I told you, my school ceased to exist. Then we got our Ecuadorian passports, and a notation on our identity cards that read "Bezit de Ecuatoriaansche Nationaliteit" (holds Ecuadorian citizenship), and on the strength of that, we took our yellow stars off, and started riding the streetcars again. I was stopped once by two Dutch secret policemen, but they let me go, apparently satisfied that I was a genuine foreigner, to whom the anti-jewish laws didn't apply. It almost seemed as if we might make it to the end of the war.

Both my parents continued to work for the Jewish Council, where my mother must have been one of the oldest employees in terms of service. The Jewish Council had become a sort of government of the jewish community. It helped the departing, but it also helped the Germans organize the departures. The Council's detractors, including my old teacher Dr. Presser, accuse the Council of collaboration in the destruction of Dutch jewry. No

doubt the Council helped in the registration of Holland's jews, and sometimes decided who had to go and who would be deferred. They also helped the Germans spread the word about anti-jewish measures and the need to comply with them, and they circulated soothing information about the fate of those who had been deported. Council members, on the other hand, said they had no idea and no way of finding out about extermination camps, and that what they did was intended to slow down the rate of deportations in the hope that the war would come to an end before all of Holland's jews had been deported. They didn't succeed. My mother, of course, was merely trying to help people; she had nothing to do with registrations or deferments from deportation. She was not a member of the Council, just an employee.

Our expectation, in that summer of '43, that liberation might come soon was totally unrealistic, but we had little, if any, reliable information, and we wanted to hope. It is remarkable to trace our expectations about the outcome of the war. We never believed that the Germans might win, because we didn't let ourselves believe that. Yet, Dr. Colijn, a very prominent Dutch politician, who had been prime minister of the Netherlands five times, and who was no friend of national socialism, wrote in July '40 that "...a German defeat can no longer be regarded as within the realm of the possible." From that low point, we, and the Dutch generally, went to expecting the Allied invasion as early as '42, and certainly in '43. It was mostly wishful thinking, but we did have two very significant facts: the U.S.S.R. and the U.S. were in the war. We had some inkling by '43 that the Germans were in trouble in Russia, but that was too far away. Salvation couldn't come from there.

We waited desperately for the Allied invasion from England. If we had known in the spring of '43 that the liberation of Holland was still two years away, the suicide rate would have jumped dramatically.

Much love --

Daddy.

November 6, 1986

Dearest children,

They finally came in the night from September 29 to September 30, 1943. It was about 2 a.m. when they rang the bell. There were two of them, I think. They were from the German "Sicherheitsdienst," generally referred to as the "grune Polizei" because of their green uniforms. As I recall, they were neither friendly nor brutal. They just told us to pack, and to be ready for departure in something like half an hour (it could have been an hour). We packed up some clothes, put together the prescribed blanketrolls, and said goodbye to all earthly belongings that could not be taken along. Then we walked out into the pitchdark of blacked-out Amsterdam. I don't remember whether we were loaded into a truck, transported by streetcar, or forced to walk, but we ended up at Amstel Station, one of Amsterdam's more modern railroad stations. There the Germans had assembled the catch of what was to be their last mass roundup of jews. All the high and mighty of the Jewish Council were there, as well as most of the jews who were still in Amsterdam in September of 1943. We were loaded into one or more trains and taken to Camp Westerbork in the eastern province of Drente.

Westerbork had existed for some time. It had been used by the pre-war Dutch government to intern illegal immigrants, mostly German jews. It was a collection of huts and barracks, set on a bleak heath. By the time we got there, it was surrounded by barbed

wire, guarded by Dutch marechaussee, and commanded by a German SS officer. The Dutch policemen never came into contact with the inmates; only the German commander and his German staff did. The SS relied to a large extent on what was called the "alte Lagerinsessen," the old camp inmates, for administrative support. In fact, the Germans were rarely seen in the camp, except on Tuesdays (I believe it was Tuesdays; it may have been Mondays), when transports left for the east.

When we arrived, we were registered in a lengthy, tedious proceeding, lasting well into the night -- erev rosh hashannah. It didn't mean a great deal to us -- we wouldn't have gone to temple anyway, but it added to the sense of despair for the observant among us. It wasn't accidental, by the way. The Germans liked to observe jewish holidays in this fashion.

After registration we were assigned to one of the many identical barracks -- a long, wooden structure, divided into two dormitories, one for men, the other for women. In the middle, there was sort of an entrance hall. At the far end of each dormitory, there was one bathroom each. Long basins, numerous faucets, but, it seems to me, no hot water. There were also no bathtubs or showers, although there probably was an installation somewhere in the camp where such amenities were available. The dormitories were furnished with beds, stacked three high, interspersed with wooden tables and benches, at which we ate, wrote letters, and did whatever else would pass the time. The "streets" outside consisted of dirt, which frequently turned to mud. In the center of the camp, there was a large

administration building, presided over by German-jewish "alte Lagerinsassen."

Somewhere, there was a structure in which cabarets were staged from time to time.

Somewhere else, there was the raison d'etre of Transit Camp Westerbork: a railroad spur and a loading platform.

Because my mother had been involved for years in efforts to help refugees, she had some friends among the jewish high and mighty at Westerbork. As a result, she was named "Saalleiterin" (dormitory leader) for the women's dormitory in our barracks. This entitled us to stay together as a family in a nook, carved out of the women's dormitory. All that meant was that a makeshift curtain was put up between two bedstructures, shielding those structures, each of which contained three stacked beds, and a table and two benches from the rest of the huge hall. That was our "room," and we were immensely pleased with it. We even had a hotplate in there.

The days at Westerbork were long and tense. Rumors flew like wildfire, and intrigue was rampant. Everyone tried to save himself from deportation to Poland. No one knew what might await us in Poland, but everyone sensed that the camps in Poland were to be avoided at all costs. That meant an endless, desperate struggle to get on a "good list," and to stay off the bad list. The jewish camp administration had some degree of power in that regard. The Germans decreed the number of people to be deported and arranged for the trains accordingly, but the jewish administrators had some say-so over the composition of the actual deportation list. So long as the Germans got their 3,000 or 4,000 (or whatever the

required number happened to be) victims, they usually didn't mind whether the jew X or the jew Y went to Auschwitz. In the long run, of course, just about everybody had to go, but the jewish administrators had the power to delay or accelerate deportation in individual cases. In a very real sense, that was a life-and-death power. As you can undoubtedly imagine, that power was not always used wisely, or in a morally defensible manner.

Bad lists, we knew, were those that contained the names of people slated for the next transport to Auschwitz. That was bad because Auschwitz was far away, it was mysterious (very few people had ever received a communication from Auschwitz) and people went there in horribly crowded cattle cars. Better lists dealt with transports to Theresienstadt and Bergen-Belsen. The Germans made it appear that a place in Theresienstadt was some sort of reward for such things as honorable service in the German Army in W.W. I, special distinction in the arts or sciences, or some similar distinction. Transports consisted of passenger cars, and Theresienstadt was described to us not as a concentration camp, but as a small Czech town that had been turned over to "deserving jews," where life was as close to normal as possible for deported jews. Bergen-Belsen was said to be a special camp from which exchange transports to the Allied world were possible, even likely. The very best lists, of course, were those extremely short ones for people who were to be released or perhaps transferred to a Red Cross supervised camp for genuine foreigners.

Somewhere at the heart of this hyperactive death machine was an administrative department called "Dienstbereich II." Here, lists were incessantly generated, revised and finally issued. I was assigned to that "Dienstbereich" as an "Ordonanz," or runner. I was given a blue armband (it's still around somewhere) and a pass permitting me to leave the camp on official business for a few very limited purposes. I could, for instance, go to the S.S. Commandant's house, just outside the gate. Most of the time, we just sat around, chatting among ourselves. I started practicing an interesting signature, the forerunner of the one I still use.

On Tuesdays, however, the work was god-awful. A curfew would be imposed on the entire camp. A train, usually a cattletrain, would stand ready at the platform, and the S.S. would be out in force. The top jewish camp leaders would also be in evidence, fawning on the Germans and being visibly at their orders. The jewish camp leader, a fellow by the name of Schlesinger, usually appeared on the platform in riding boots. A sad chapter in the history of German jewry. I should note, though, that for every so-called "leader," there were hundreds if not thousands of German jews who came through Westerbork as part of the doomed mass of jewish humanity, and who received no preferential treatment whatsoever. That, however, is an aside. We "Ordonanzen" had the task of taking the lists to the barracks; we were the angels of death. We also had to stand by on the platform, in case the high and mighty wanted to convey a message. After deportation duty was over, I went back to our "room," went to bed and, so my mother tells me, regularly wetted my bed.

I don't know what my father did while my mother was busy with her administrative duties in the barracks and I worked as a runner. There really wasn't much to do at Westerbork, and work was not required, I believe. People wanted and needed activity, of course, to take their minds off the transports, and they did all sorts of things. We never got to a cabaret, but I heard that they were excellent, and greatly entertained the S.S. commandant, who attended them regularly. As I recall, no cabarets were staged during our four months at Westerbork. We did go to a "cafe" one evening. The cafe was in a wooden hut, a band played latin music, and lemonade was served. As I've told you, my memory of that period is hazy, but I clearly recall how bizarre I found the idea of a carefree cafe in Westerbork.

Finally, late in January '44, our turn came. As holders of Ecuadorian passports, we were assigned to a transport to Bergen-Belsen. No cattle cars for us, but the rolling stock was pretty shabby. Some of the windows were broken, and it was very cold. The train was crowded. It traveled at night, which added greatly to the ominous atmosphere. The distance from Westerbork to Bergen-Belsen is not very great, but I remember the trip as long. We arrived at the railroad station nearest to the camp (Bergen? Belsen?) in the morning, and were greeted by yelling S.S. troopers with dogs. It certainly didn't look like a "preference camp" or an "exchange camp" to us. It scared the hell out of us.

Oh, by the way, our short period without the yellow badge came to an end when we arrived in Westerbork. We had to sew our stars back on as soon as we arrived there.

Much love --

Daddy

January 31, 1987

Dearest children,

We were taken from the railroad station or platform to the entrance of "Aufenthaltslager Bergen-Belsen," by truck I believe, and then marched into the camp, first past the goodlooking S.S. barracks, and then down what appeared to be the main artery. I have since learned that it ran from east to west. To our left were various compounds of barracks, divided from each other, and surrounded by barbed wire on all sides, including the side that faced the road along which we were marching. In the back, on the other side of the compounds, were high wooden guard towers, manned by S.S. troops with machineguns. To our right were two kitchens, surrounded by other structures and some open land. We were being marched in to this ominous looking place by a few S.S. non-commissioned officers, one of whom -- we later learned that his name was Heinz -- kept yelling and calling us "Jordanplanscher" (people who splash about in the river Jordan). He must have had biblical training.

We ended up in one of the compounds, generally referred to as the "starcamp," because we wore civilian clothes, not the usual striped garb, and the yellow star. Here, too, there was a jewish elite of people who had been there the longest. They were the remnants of the jewish community of Salonika, Greece. In addition to that, there were people from

Holland (of course), Belgium, France and Germany. Most of us, I think, had come from Holland.

The compound consisted of one or two very long stone structures at the east end, which had probably once been stables, and a substantial number of wooden barracks. It was divided into a men's camp and a women's camp, which were separated by a gate that was closed at night. I believe that my father and I were initially put in one of the stone barracks, and my mother was in a wooden structure. The beds were two-tiered, and there was a separate eating space in each barrack. There was even some closet space. The food struck us at first as adequate. Coffee and bread in the morning, some sort of soup at lunch, which sometimes contained some meat and vegetables, and something similar at night.

In some respects, such as sleeping quarters and food, Bergen-Belsen was no worse than Westerbork initially. In other respects, it was a great deal worse. As I told you, there were a few elements of civilization -- however tenuous -- at Westerbork. There was nothing of that kind in B.-B. There were only barracks, latrines and a pathetic infirmary. You could eat (less and less), relieve yourself, sleep and work. There was absolutely nothing else. Then there were daily rollcalls. That was new to us, and we came to dread it. There was an "Appelplatz" in the middle of our compound, where we'd have to line up at least twice a day and be counted, no matter how cold, wet or hot it might be. The count didn't always go smoothly, and sometimes we'd be standing there for hours, while the S.S. counted and recounted and recounted. No one ever escaped, but mistakes in counting were frequent.

Also, some of the inmates would occasionally try to hide in order to escape the work details, which were organized immediately after the morning rollcall.

There were various work details, ranging from work in the kitchens, which people desperately wanted, to the so-called "Stubbenkommando," which people desperately tried to avoid. The "Stubbenkommando" (all men) would be marched into the woods and set to work digging out tree trunks. It was very hard work, and the S.S. guards beat the workers regularly and mercilessly. I was too young and was never selected for the "Stubbenkommando," but Opa was.

Also unlike Westerbork were the punishments that would be meted out for various infractions, mostly minor. The one I remember most vividly was "am Zaun stehen," to stand by the fence. People would be sentenced to stand at the fence for hours, staring into space.

The S.S. men with whom we had regular contact until the camp became so infested with disease that they no longer dared to enter it, were a handful of non-commissioned officers. I remember Heinz, whom I have already mentioned, a fellow by the name of Rauh who was in charge of work details, and the worst of them all -- "der rote Muller." Muller was pudgy and his face was red. When he flew into a rage, which he did regularly, the face got even redder. He yelled a lot and hit people with abandon. He was said to be a homosexual. If so, he was the only homosexual I ever saw at B.B.

S.S. officers were remote and one rarely saw them.

The encounter with Red Miller that stands out most vividly in my mind involved my father's shaving. Washing was difficult in B.B., because there were few sinks and no hot water. Shaving was even tougher, because there was no source of supply for blades. My father had brought an electric razor along, but there were no outlets. Once, after all the two-tier beds had been converted to three tiers and the top bed had thus been brought closer to the ceiling, my father climbed onto a top bed and managed to hook up his razor into a light fixture. While he was shaving, Red Miller walked in. I was there, and I was scared to death for my poor father. Red Miller glowered and asked my father what he had there. Opa told him that it was a razor. Fortunately he didn't blow his stack; he merely took the razor and walked out. Maybe he had wanted an electric razor and was glad of the opportunity to acquire one at no cost.

The work detail to which I was assigned was called the "Schukommando." This was 1944, and Germany was suffering from severe shortages. Somebody got the harebrained idea that German shoes could and should be recycled. And so thousands of pairs of old shoes were shipped to B.B. and piled up there in absurd looking shoe mountains. Then we were set to work cutting them up, so that -- at least in theory -- the topleather could be reused. I don't know if a single new shoe ever resulted from our labors, but I doubt it. Oma was

also on the shoe detail for a while, and perhaps Opa as well. I remember Opa doing all kinds of work, including -- at one point -- sawing wood with me.

After a while , I was taken off the shoedetail and became a runner once again. There was a little guardhouse by the gate leading from the main interior road to the Star Camp, which was usually manned by an S.S. man. I got to stand outside that guardhouse, ready to run whatever errands needed to be run. I haven't got the vaguest recollection of the nature of those errands.

After our arrival things very rapidly went from bad to worse. B.B. was not initially set up as a concentration camp. It was an "Aufenthaltslager," a camp where people stayed, or were temporarily stored until the Third Reich had some use for them. We were to be treated as jews, and there was little doubt what that meant in Nazi Germany, but we were to be kept alive since there was a possibility that we could be used to the Nazis' advantage. Treatment, therefore, was to be rough but not lethal. Pretty soon, however, things got out of hand. Food got very scarce, and no jews, whatever their potential value to the Reich, could be fed at the expense of Germans going hungry. Furthermore, the German retreat before the Russian armies accelerated, and the Nazis had to abandon the concentration camps in the east one after another. As a result, B.B. got more and more crowded. It all culminated in the virtual transfer of Auschwitz to B.B., commandant, guards, inmates and even barracks included. What had started out as one of the less

severe rings of Hitler's inferno, became the worst. Only the gaschambers stayed behind in Auschwitz.

Eventually, life boiled down to three issues. The first issue, and by far the one that preoccupied us most, was food. The relatively adequate diet that we found in B.B. when we arrived soon vanished. For most of our time there we lived on one small piece of bread a day (the bread was dark and square, the German "Kommissbrot," and an individual got about two inches of that a day), and one or two bowls of a thin turnip or beet soup, which contained nothing except water and an occasional turnip. We were, in fact, starving. It is an amazing experience. Your mind turns to food, and will deal with very little else. Nothing else seems to matter very much. The overwhelming question day-in, day-out is: will I get enough to eat today?

The second issue was: will we get out of here? There was an occasional transport to the outside world, and rumors were constantly rampant. Yet, as the days, weeks and months dragged on, it became more and more difficult to keep that hope alive.

The third issue was even more remote: were the Allies going to reach B.B. in time to liberate us? We saw the American planes way up in the sky almost daily, and once the camp was even attacked by U.S. fighter bombers, whose pilots probably didn't know what they were strafing. Yet we had no news, and the rumors were shaped by the violent emotional swings to which starving prisoners are prey. One day the Allies were supposed

to be approaching fast; the next day (maybe during the initial phases of the Battle of the Bulge?), the Allied armies were being pushed back into the sea by the Germans. The prospect of British or American soldiers appearing at the gates of B. B. seemed unreal.

Much love --

Daddy.

May 14, 1987

Dearest children,

We were in Bergen-Belsen for one year. I have been trying to figure out how to describe that year to you, but it's difficult. It was a long succession of grim, undifferentiated days. Very few dramatic things happened. The Germans weren't actually trying to kill us, but neither were they trying to keep us alive, and as overcrowding and decreasing food supplies got more and more severe, death became pervasive. There was very little besides death, disease, filth and hopelessness. The frenetic attempts at entertainment that were characteristic of life in Westerbork didn't exist in B.B. There was no beauty of any kind. No music, no natural beauty in the surroundings, no people who didn't look like dirty scarecrows or uniformed sadists, no books, no buildings that were anything but grimly utilitarian, and, so it seems to me, no colors but dirty green and dirty grey.

There was no hot water, and even cold water was difficult to get to. I suppose that people did make some effort at washing their clothes, but it must have been extremely ineffectual. There were neither baths nor showers, but on one or two occasions we were marched to another part of the camp and given showers. One of these occasions has taken on a macabre significance for me in the light of what I know now but didn't even vaguely suspect then. As I remember it, we were roused out of our barracks in the middle of the night or the very early morning and ordered to line up on the "Appelplatz." There we

were told that there was a water shortage in the region, and that water pressure was adequate only at night. Therefore, we were going to have a nocturnal shower. We were then marched to the bathhouse and ordered to take showers. All proceeded routinely, and we returned to our barracks. It did not occur to anyone that there might be something sinister about the Germans' sudden concern for our cleanliness.

The overcrowding got worse and worse as the months passed. Originally, the barracks had been divided into a sleeping area, filled with double bunks, and an area for eating or sitting which was equipped with long wooden tables and benches. There were also some wooden lockers. The eating area was first reduced, then eliminated. The lockers disappeared. The space between the beds was reduced. The double bunks were converted into triple bunks. Finally, two people were assigned to each narrow, stinking, straw-mattressed bed. I shared a bed with my father. Obviously, cramming a lot of starving, dirty people together like that leads to disease. In our case, it was mostly typhoid, carried by lice. People died quickly and in large quantities. The corpses were put in plain wooden boxes and carted away.

When disease in our camp reached epidemic proportions, the S.S. stopped entering the camp. In their place came prisoners from other parts of the camp, generally criminals, who were given power over us. They were called "Kapos." They were coarse and brutal, and no improvement over their masters.

As I told you in my last letter, our overwhelming preoccupation was food. Warm meals were brought into the camp in large, galvanized bucket-like containers called "Gamellen," each of which had to be carried by two men. We followed the progress of these Gamellen eagerly, and tried to position ourselves in line so that our turn would come when the food at the bottom was ladled out. There might be a piece of potato or even a piece of meat for the lucky person who got to the head of the line at just the right time. Of course in the last few months, there was nothing in the soup except turnips, so it didn't make much difference. Occasionally, some people got packages and were able to satisfy their hunger for a day or two. I believe we got only one package, and I've forgotten who sent it.

One day in the summer, a group of fairly wild looking people arrived in our camp. They were North African jews who had been given British passports before the British Army retreated in one of those seesaw battles that were then being fought in Libya. The Germans deported these "British" jews to B.B., where they created a sensation, not because they were so different from any other jews we'd ever seen before, but because they weren't hungry. They would take the food and put it away. I remember one day the soup that was distributed at noon was gruel-like. When the North Africans put it away under their beds (there was no other place to put anything), it congealed, and took on the consistency of cold pudding. To us, that was irresistible. People rounded up their few remaining possessions (clothes, jewelry), and went to trade them for dishes of cold soup, generously garnished with dirt, hair and other delicacies. The North Africans didn't stay long, and we never found out what became of them.

By January '45 things had gotten very grim. My father, in particular, was in very bad shape, and my mother was close to the end of her rope. Around the middle of the month, some German officials arrived from Berlin. One of them, a Miss Slottke, was known to us from Amsterdam. She played some sort of role in dealing with the "jewish question." The word spread like wildfire: there was to be a transport of "South Americans." We were so worn out from having our hopes raised and dashed on numerous earlier occasions that we didn't believe it. After a few days, however, we were called in and asked a few questions, which seemed to be designed to determine whether we were still sufficiently alive to let the outside world see us. Somehow we passed the test, even though my father had to be propped up.

On Sunday, January 21, we were taken back to the bathhouse by the suddenly friendly S.S. man we knew as Heinz ("It really hasn't been so bad, has it?"), and then by truck to the railroad station. There we found a train with red cross markings, consisting of second and third class carriages. We entered a world that we had forgotten: the carriages were clean and there was food. We were told to remove our yellow stars. What we were not told, however, is where we were going. Given our profound suspicion of the Germans, that made for a certain nervousness. At 4 p.m. the train pulled out. Those among us who knew German geography soon told us that we were heading east. We knew very little, but we knew that there was nothing good to the east.

To the extent possible, we enjoyed the food and the sight of the destroyed Germany through which we traveled. After about a day we reached Berlin. Because of the destruction to the railway network, our train was routed along the tracks of the municipal railway, and we passed within a block of the house where we lived when I was born. The city was in ruins, which struck us as only just, but it also gave you the feeling that everything around there, including our train, might be blown up at any moment.

Then, at last, we turned south, and Switzerland became a possibility. On Tuesday, January 23, the train stopped twice, first in Biberach and then in Ravensbrueck. Forty people were removed from the train in Biberack and ninety in Ravensbrueck, altogether about half of our little transport. The word was that a hitch had developed in the exchange program, and that our group was too large. The people who were forced to get off were devastated and convinced that they had lost their chance of survival. In fact, however, they were allowed to await liberation pretty well unmolested. The end was very near, but no one among us had enough strength or optimism to believe that.

On Wednesday, a number of women from a Red Cross camp joined us. They were genuine "enemy aliens," and made us feel somewhat safer. Yet, there continued to be hitches, and the train kept stopping. Around midnight, we arrived at Kreutzlingen. The train stopped. On the other side of the platform was a Swiss train. The Germans told us to get off, cross the platform, and board the Swiss train. Needlessly, but out of habit, they

yelled: "Schnell, schnell." The train pulled out. In the dark, I saw soldiers outside the train wearing unfamiliar looking helmets. We were in Switzerland. The nightmare was over.

Much love --

Daddy

P.S. That is too simple. It wasn't that simple. For one thing, that train was deathridden, even though Miss Slotke and her cohorts had supposedly made sure that only those with a good chance of surviving were selected for the exchange transport. I am not sure how many people died on the train in Germany, or how many made it to Switzerland only to die there. I do know that I am the only one of my acquaintance and age group to come out of it with two surviving parents. My friend Werner Hasenberg lost his father on that trip, and my friend and classmate Jaap Wolf lost his mother. Then there was the degree to which the nightmare stayed with us. My mother maintains that her survival caused her severe feelings of guilt. She didn't understand why she survived and so many of her friends, colleagues and acquaintances were dead. Frankly that never troubled me. It never occurred to me that life is logical or explicable. Some blind fate caused our survival, and I am immensely grateful for that. I mourn for all those who died, but I see no connection between their deaths and our survival. I suppose that the experience did severe damage to my father, who talked least about it, quite a bit of damage to my mother, and not very much to me.

August 23, 1987

Dearest children,

This letter will be a little different, at least in part. I have some explaining to do. In the P.S. to my last letter I wrote that the concentration camp experience did not do me much damage. Deborah wondered about that remark. Let me try to put it in context. As I recall, and to the extent that I recall, the camp came as the culmination of ten years of being hunted, with a relentless enemy constantly closing in on us. The camp, once it came, was the final test: within a relatively short time we'd either be dead or finally at the end of the ten-year nightmare. I suppose I was of an age at which tests and challenges are almost welcome. I wanted to survive, and I wanted to pull my parents through, and I succeeded. That success gave me a feeling of accomplishment, which helped me in later life. On balance, therefore, the year in B-B and the four months in Westerbork did not leave me with any severe physical or emotional scars. The same cannot be said of the ten years between our departure from Berlin and our deportation from Amsterdam. From the age of four on, I felt hunted and an outcast. There was as brief respite in pre-war Holland, but it was pitifully short. We arrived in Amsterdam in May '38. It must have taken me at least a year to learn the language, get acclimatized and find friends. So by May '39, I may have felt happily at home for the first time in my conscious life. The Germans invaded Holland in May '40. After that, everything I needed to lead a reasonably normal life was

systematically taken away. Those ten years of persecution did affect me, I think, and loom in my memory as far more frightening than the camps themselves.

And so, back to 1945. We arrived in St. Gallen on January 25, and were moved to a place called Buhler, where we were put up in a makeshift camp, guarded by Swiss soldiers, at least one of whom was given to making anti-semitic remarks. It was cold, and we were bewildered. The next day, my father was taken to a hospital in St. Gallen. A day thereafter, my mother and I were also hospitalized. We remained there until Tuesday, January 30, when we were put on a train to Geneva. In Geneva, we changed to a French train, guarded by American M.P.'s. That was our first encounter with Americans. They seemed like creatures from another, more fortunate world. Late that night we arrived in Marseille. The city was dark -- blacked out -- but in port there was a fully lit liner, the Gripsholm, which flew the neutral Swedish flag. It was there to take on the exchanged prisoners and carry them home. It then became apparent, however, that the Ecuadorian government had no intention of recognizing our "courtesy" passports, and that we therefore had no place to go. We never did get to see the Gripsholm except from afar. As I recall, we spent some time on a U.S. hospital ship, the Algonquin, the affluence and cleanliness of which overwhelmed us, before being placed aboard an Italian rustbucket called the Allessandria. We set sail on February 7. The crossing was smooth, but a little unnerving. The war was still on, and for all we knew, German planes and U-boats were still around. We arrived in the port of Philippeville (since renamed), Algeria, in the evening of February 9. We had absolutely no idea what was to become of us, and eyed the French police on the dock suspiciously. None of us trusted the French in those days. Then

an American car appeared, and we felt better. After another night aboard our trusty rustbucket, we went ashore and were taken to a small resort community outside of Philippeville called Jeanne d'Arc. Above that community, which was largely deserted, there was a camp consisting of Quonset huts, guarded by Yugoslavs in British uniforms. It was to be our home for the next half year. As it turned out, it was a very pleasant home. We had a little cubicle in one of the Quonset huts. Food was plentiful, there were showers, and there was even a library. The beach was beautiful, deserted, and only a few minutes walk from camp.

Before any of that could be enjoyed, however, we had to be processed. That meant delousing, the burning of all our clothes, and the issuance of khaki shirts and trousers and some sort of shoes -- G.I., I assume. Also, the most seriously ill among us had to be cured. My father spent a number of weeks in a military hospital attached to the camp. When he finally came "home," I welcomed him with a drawing that had Dutch and English wording on it. Funny. No German, although that was still the language we spoke among each other.

The camp at Jeanne d'Arc was run by UNRRA, the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, at that time a gigantic agency which was trying to cope with an enormous world-wide refugee problem that the war had spawned. The man in charge of the camp and most if not all of his staff were Americans. Hence the American

car we had spotted from the boat. They were friendly and helpful, and assisted us in reestablishing contact with friends and relatives in England and the U.S.

Daily life was fairly lazy and pleasant. A group of teenagers, of which I was one, spent a great deal of time at the beach. We rediscovered pleasure and the attraction of the opposite sex (very chastely). Occasionally, the British Army entertainment service showed outdoor movies. At other times, we went to town. "Town" was Philippeville, a fairly sleepy, small Algerian town. We windowshopped (there was precious little in the windows), and occasionally made a small purchase, went to a restaurant, or went to a movie. Just being able to walk freely around a town was intoxicating.

At some point during that period, we must have made a decision about our future. I don't remember much about that. I imagine that we could have gone back to Holland, but that was never seriously considered. I suppose that my father saw no future for himself there, and that my mother feared the memories that would haunt her in Amsterdam. As for my own feelings about returning to Holland, I just have no recollection at all. Palestine was another possibility. After all, my mother was a life-long Zionist. I don't remember whether we gave it serious thought. To the best of my recollection, I was against it. I wanted to get back to school, and I didn't want to be delayed by having to learn yet another language. The choice, therefore, was America. In order to get an American visa in those days you needed two affidavits from American citizens who would undertake to see to it that the immigrants would not become a public burden. We got one such affidavit from our

relatives in Charleston (Uncle Arthur, my mother's brother), and the other from Dr. Lowenfeld, the father of Andreas, the friend of my Prague days. With that taken care of, we had to wait for the availability of visas under the German quota. We knew that that wouldn't take very long, since few Germans were then eligible to immigrate into the U.S.

After a very pleasant half year or so at Philippeville, we moved to Algiers, which was to be our port of embarkation. The train trip was long and sooty, but Algiers was exciting. It was a big city, full of life, and full of military personnel from all over. We stayed in a hotel, and took our meals in a Centre d'Accueil. We made some contacts in the Jewish community, spent a lot of time at the U.S. Consulate, and took a lot of walks around the city. We got a bad impression of the French colons [?], who seemed reactionary, anti-semitic and arrogant. We got hints about what was going on in South Africa from talking - in Dutch -- with South African soldiers. Finally, in October, we got two berths on a Liberty ship leaving Algiers for Philadelphia. The two berths were good for males only, so my father and I went. My mother followed about six weeks later. So my father and I set sail for America in a small, slow freighter, which took some three weeks to cross the Atlantic. We were lucky to have gotten any space at all. The war in Europe was over, and every available ship was pressed into service to bring the G.I.'s home (originally, they were then supposed to go on to invade Japan, but V.J. Day had been accelerated by the atomic bomb).

Much love -- Daddy.

August 31, 1987

Dearest children,

Our ship was called the S.S. James Kearney. It was a mass-produced freighter of no great beauty or solidity. In fact, word had it that ships of this kind -- they were called Liberty Ships -- had been known to break apart in rough seas. There was room for only a handful of passengers. I believe there were about six of us. We called in at Bone, Algeria, passed Gibraltar and then started the long trans-Atlantic trek. The weather was fairly miserable. After some three weeks, we entered the mouth of the Delaware and finally berthed in Philadelphia on November 11, 1945. The day was gray and cold, and we shivered in our khaki outfits. I don't recall much about our arrival. There must have been representatives of some Jewish agency or other, and they must have provided us with some money, because to the best of my recollection we didn't have a dime. By the time we reached the Philadelphia railroad station, we must have had enough to buy two tickets to New York.

I don't know what I expected to find in America, but I remember being taken aback by the Pennsylvania Railroad. Our train to New York was primitive, dirty and ill maintained. I must have thought that everything would be gleaming and modern in the new world. In New York we were received by various friends, who looked after us -- sort of. We found a room in a rooming house somewhere in the West Eighties. It, too, was primitive, dirty and overrun with cockroaches. My father and I were happy to be in America, but more than a little lost. We used to go down to Horn and Hardart on 72nd Street for breakfast regularly, and we saw a lot of movies. It seems to me that people took an interest in us, but not in

our history. The word "holocaust" hadn't been invented yet, and no one seemed particularly keen to find out how we had spent the war years. On the other hand, they were quite eager to tell us of the hardships they had experienced as immigrants (just about all of them were German-jewish), and of the hard work that had enabled them to reach a reasonable standard of living in the new country. They were also full of good advice about how to get ahead in this country. There were, it seemed, various ways to success here, but going to college wasn't one of them.

In the meantime, however, my education was not neglected. The Lowenfelds, whom we saw only very occasionally for brunch on Sundays, had decided that I shouldn't go to a public high school. They thought that the culture shock would be too much. So they arranged a scholarship for me at the Walden School, an upper middle class private school at the corner of Central Park West and 88th Street, whose student body must have been over 90% jewish. I don't think I started until early in '46. They put me in the senior class, but with the intention that I wouldn't graduate until '47. I liked Walden. The classes were small, and the students as well as the teachers were friendly. Again, there was no particular interest in my past. My classmates were jewish liberals, preoccupied with union struggles for better wages and working conditions, with racism, and with U.S.-Soviet relations (the Cold War was just starting). The fate of European jewry saddened them, but certainly didn't preoccupy them. As far as I recall, there wasn't even much talk about Palestine and zionism, although those were the crucial years (Exodus) leading up to the establishment of Israel. I was not bothered by any of that, although, looking at it 40 years

later, it seems strange. It is just possible that we were the first Holocaust survivors to enter the U.S., but nobody noticed.

In spite of the run-down trains and our primitive living quarters, America dazzled us. We found the supermarkets incredible. The overwhelming displays of food, the availability of just about anything one might want, the bulging stores, the absence of war scars -- what an amazing country! Americans themselves, though, thought they were deprived: butter, white shirts and maybe a few other items, were hard to get during and immediately after the war.

My mother arrived in Baltimore in December '45, and we moved to another rooming house, this one on 78th Street. It was an old brownstone that had seen better days. By this time, it may well have been restored to its former elegance, but in '46 it was a mess. My parents had a large, high-ceilinged room, to which a small mini-kitchen was attached, which still had an icebox. I had a small room upstairs, which held little more than a bed. There was an ancient bathroom, which we shared with numerous other roomers.

In short, those early years in America could not have been easy, although I do not recall that they depressed me. We certainly had no money. We had arrived in this country penniless, without any clothes to speak of, without any household goods whatsoever, without any valuables of any kind. I'm not sure how we got by in the early months. I suppose my Uncle Arthur may have provided some funds. We also might have had

support from jewish welfare. After a while my father found a partner and went into the book business. They set up a company called Transbook on lower Broadway, and started to import art books from Switzerland, mostly from the Skira publishing firm in Geneva. My father understood books and art, but he knew nothing about the American market, and neither did his partner. It was fun while it lasted, but it was doomed from the start. My mother went to work for a jewish organization that tried to establish a register of European jews, so that those who were looking for friends and relatives might have a place to turn to. There were no computers, of course, so the job entailed handling thousands of index cards. My mother worked there for quite a while before she managed to find her way into social work. In any event, the two of them started to bring in some money, and we became self-supporting on a modest scale.

My life at Walden was strange. In many ways I was, of course, far more mature than my classmates, but socially I was very naive. I understood nothing about the life of teenagers in America. In many ways I did not relate to my surroundings at all. Added to that was the fact that we were poor and most of my classmates were rich -- some stinking rich. I remember being picked up by my friend Dave Podell at our rooming house and carted to another world in his Caddie (that was the car at the time, there were no imports). That other world consisted of a duplex on Fifth Avenue, a summer home on Long Island and a 90 ft. yacht in Long Island Sound. Other than these excursions, I didn't really get to enjoy most of the things New York had to offer. New York was great in those days. It had become the capital of the world, and it wore its newly acquired glory well. Cultural life

was flourishing, and life generally was better than it is now -- a little less frantic, a little more graceful. But then, as now, you needed money to enjoy New York, and we didn't have any. At the recommendation of a Walden teacher, I spent my first two summers in America as a counselor at a camp near Midvale, N.J., which belonged to an organization called Nature Friends. I had a fairly good time there and made a little money, but the dear Nature Friends were rather far to the left on the political spectrum, and eventually ended up on the Attorney General's list of communist front organizations. Some seven years later, at the height of Joe MacCarthy's influence, that ended my diplomatic career before it could get started.

I also had a job during the school year. After school, I worked for Taylor and Bombach, a little outfit that produced and delivered photostats in those pre-xerox days. We worked in a small, dark office in a building near Times Square. There were two or three large cameras. The originals were placed under glass on a horizontal surface in front of the camera, and the picture was taken. The paper holding the photographic image was then cranked out into a chemical solution behind the camera, then taken to a drier, and finally trimmed to size. It was a tedious process and a tedious job, for which I was paid 75 cents an hour, if I remember right. Not a bad wage for those days, but the post-war inflation was setting in, and money was losing value.

Much love -- Daddy.

November 29, 1987

Dearest children,

In June '47 I became a high school graduate. We produced a graduation play, set on a train from New York to California, and enjoyed an all-night graduation party in Dave Podell's duplex apartment on Fifth Avenue. My classmates were preoccupied with getting admitted to the colleges of their choice. It was not easy in '47 because of the huge influx of veterans, who were going to college on the G.I. bill. I wasn't at all sure what I ought to do. I didn't take the SAT's because my math background was deficient, and my knowledge of English of recent vintage and probably -- at least in some respects -- not up to snuff either. It never occurred to anyone, including myself, that I might be a special case, deserving of special consideration. Someone came up with the idea of Brooklyn College, one of the tuition free colleges of the City of New York, and that is where I went. Why Brooklyn? I have no idea. CCNY would certainly have been more convenient, but maybe it had too many applicants. In any event, I became a subway commuter, and spent about 2 hours a day on the subway train traveling to and from college.

It was a haphazard transition from a private high school to a public college, but I did end up as a college student, and my Americanization was reasonably complete. I made the dean's list at Brooklyn in both semesters of my freshman year, then transferred to Queens College, after we had left our cockroach-infested rooming house and moved to a small but

brand new apartment in Rego Park, Queens. We became citizens in the year I graduated -- 1951.

Obviously a lot has happened to me since '51, but it is not part of the story I set out to tell you about 2 years and 11 letters ago. Therefore, this is the last letter of the series. Before concluding, however, I'd like to say something about what has come to be known as the holocaust. As I told you, neither the word nor the concern about remembering existed when we first came to this country. Eventually, retroactive concern grew, the word holocaust came into vogue, and the disaster became mythologized. Not that it didn't happen -- of course it did -- but it is being transformed into a political weapon by a lot of people who talked about it without understanding what happened, or even wanting to understand it. Historical accuracy has become irrelevant, and survivors are nuisances who are in the way of today's political realities. First, of course, and most excusable, are the Zionists. Their concern is the transformation of a peaceful, anti-violent people into a mighty military power. As Philip Roth wrote in the N.Y. Times Book Review on October 18 of this year: "The collective memory of Polish and Russian anti-Semitic pogroms had fostered in most of our families the idea that our worth as human beings, even perhaps our distinction as a people, was embodied in the incapacity to perpetrate the sort of bloodletting visited upon our ancestors." The jews of the diaspora were not violent. As a whole, we thought of wars and playing at soldiers as "goyim naches," something that amused non-jews, but which we found ridiculous. There is nothing much wrong with that attitude. In fact, it can be admirable, but it was misplaced in the face of Hitler. Yet deeply

ingrained attitudes can't be changed that quickly, and the fact is that the overwhelming majority of the six million went to their deaths without resistance. Today's Israelis, being short on empathy and historical imagination, can't understand or forgive that. Hence the heavy emphasis at Yad Vashem (the memorial to the holocaust victims near Jerusalem) and elsewhere on the fighters of the Warsaw Ghetto and the other few who resisted with force of arms. There is nothing wrong with that: those WERE heroes. Yet if it is coupled with a thinly disguised disdain for those who didn't resist physically, it dishonors the vast majority of the jews who were slaughtered by the Nazis.

This attitude also assumes that the pacifism, or at least non-violence, of pre-war European jewry is forever discredited and that the bellicose stand of today's Israel is forever justified. I doubt it. Israel's "shoot first, ask questions later" policy has not proved brilliantly successful.

There are numerous other, less excusable and less important groups trying to distort the history of the holocaust to fit their political needs. The communists see it all as part of their anti-fascist struggle in which the jews played a subordinate and equivocal role. The neo-nazis say it didn't happen at all, or, if it did, it was justified. Some homosexuals claim that they, too were victims of the holocaust -- a patent absurdity. The only group that hasn't been heard from is the one that really did suffer a very similar fate: the gypsies.

The purpose of this tirade is to express the hope that the truth about what happened to Europe's jews in those twelve terrible years (1933-1945) can somehow be preserved and kept out of the clutches of those who would sacrifice it to contemporary political needs.

Much love,

Daddy.

December 24, 1987

Dearest children,

Here is a postscript to my last letter, occasioned by the enclosed article, which appeared recently in the New York Review of Books. In it, Primo Levi addresses some of the issues I tried to deal with in that last letter.

First of all, I am not now, and have never been one of the silent survivors Levi mentions. I am not reluctant to talk about my experiences; it is not too painful for me. It is, however, a very special memory, and I don't like to share it with people who are unwilling or incapable of understanding what I have to tell. It seems to me that one cannot understand a story or a message unless one has a frame of reference that can lend meaning to such a story or message. For someone who has had a similar experience, the frame of reference is in place, and no problem arises. When I tell my story in America, however, I rarely come across anyone who has had an experience that is even vaguely similar. Such people can understand my tale only if they are somehow able to construct a frame of reference. That takes compassion, imagination, and something like a sense of history. By a sense of history I mean the ability to put aside the passions and preoccupations of the present, and to attempt to see things through the eyes of people who lived in circumstances that were radically different from anything known today. Frankly, very few people have those essential qualities. Most people's reactions are as jejune and uncomprehending as those of

the little boy who explained to Levi how he could and should have escaped from Auschwitz. At least that was a little boy, entitled to his sublime ignorance.

Much love,

D.

[In 1990, I began writing a book about my father's childhood. I asked him many questions, in person and on paper. This is one of the last letters he wrote in response; he was diagnosed with prostate cancer some months later, and died in 1995. While I haven't given up hope of finishing the book I started, I understand now that my father's letters are more important than anything I will ever write on the subject. --DSS]

December 14, 1992

Dearest D.,

Thinking about your questions, it occurred to me that they really have a single theme: how central was the memory of my childhood experiences to my adult life? That is an interesting question, especially in light of Oma's submission to the German compensation authorities, which we discovered and read together at Thanksgiving. Clearly, Oma thought that my childhood experiences, culminating in the Belsen year, continued to have a major physical and psychological impact on me. I believe that these experiences had a diminishing influence, and were never central to my adult life in the U.S. Oma exaggerated; I may underestimate.

When we first arrived here, the memories were very fresh, but interest in them was minimal. As far as I remember, the Walden School students, most of whom were Jewish,

never expressed the slightest interest. Beyond that, even our relatives, such as uncle Kurt, uncle Arthur, cousin Henry, never asked us about our experiences. Many people simply weren't interested. Others must have thought that we would be better off forgetting those years of horror. As I told you, the general interest in the holocaust had not yet arisen. So, since I am not one to volunteer, I did not talk about the war years, or what led up to them. At first, I had some friends in New York who had shared my experiences, but we didn't talk about them either.

So gradually the memories faded, and when the time came to make some major decisions, such as getting married, they played virtually no role at all. Certainly, if I hadn't sensed that Mummy instinctively understood my past, I couldn't have married her, but the judgment that I made went beyond me and my history. It had to do with Mummy's view of the world and her capacity for empathy.

By the time you guys came along, I knew that I would want to tell you all about it in due course, but not before you were ready. I didn't think that you should be burdened with it when you were little, and were just beginning to form a concept of what the world is all about. It seems cruel to me to cast a dark shadow on those early years, which ought to be largely imbued with optimism. Then came the years when children are fascinated with drama and excitement, a fascination which is unduly and clumsily heightened by television. I didn't want my experiences to be transformed into a two-dimensional

adventure story, to be used when you played a form of "can you top this" with your friends. That almost struck me as a form of secular sacrilege.

Finally you became adults, and I wanted to tell you all about it. I know that I may have had a subconscious need to unburden myself. Certainly Oma would have thought so. At the more conscious level, that never was the case. Your coming of age more or less coincided with the world-wide interest in the holocaust, mostly on the part of Jews, but also on the part of others. From silence we went to a hugely amplified cacophony of disparate voices, all expressing their view on what happened and what lessons are to be drawn from it. Much of it disturbed me, because it twisted historical truth (an elusive concept) for contemporary ends. I was all the more disturbed because the witnesses are reaching age levels at which they can't be expected to be around much longer. To the greatest degree possible, we must preserve the record of what happened.

When I say "what happened," I don't just mean the ultimate horror, but also the events that led up to it. We attended an Anne Frank dinner the other day, at which a high school student talked very movingly of her recent trip to Poland and her visit to Auschwitz, Maidanek and Treblinka. She showed slides of the gas chambers, the crematoria, piles of abandoned shoes, stacks of suitcases with Jewish names dutifully marked on them, and other items that brought the "final solution of the Jewish question" almost palpably close to this group of Jews, teenagers and Denver schoolteachers (it was a kick-off dinner for an Anne Frank essay competition in the Denver schools). The student who made the

presentation broke down and cried when she was finished. Near the end of her talk, she complained bitterly that the world did nothing while these death factories swallowed up millions of Jewish men, women and children.

That is an understandable, and oft repeated outcry, but it misses the point. By the time the Nazis decided to exterminate the Jews, the world was at war, and the only solution was speedy and complete victory over the Nazis. Nothing else made much sense or would have brought anything but minimal relief. The guilty silence occurred much earlier, when an evil genius came to power in Germany, who had written a book which clearly prefigured where the Nazi program was headed. Then he turned his brownshirted hoodlums loose on the streets of German to hound, torture and kill Jews and political opponents. Then came "Kristallnacht," and the burning of books, not to speak of the concentration camps. The "civilized" world looked on and did nothing. There may have been an occasional "tsk, tsk," but that was about it. That was the time when the lives of millions of Jews were lost, because the world still had the power to rein Hitler in. By '42 it was much, much too late.

This tragedy affected me, perhaps even more than the year in Belsen. Emigration at age four is difficult enough, but the sense of being hounded while an indifferent world looks on is worse. I figured out the other day that, after we left Berlin in '33, I was not again adequately housed until I got an apartment in Washington in '59, just before I got married. In between my parents and I lived either in too-small apartments (two rooms) or in

pensions filled with scared, harried and nervous German-Jewish refugees. From my earliest childhood I knew that Hitler was evil incarnate, and that he had to be stopped. I also knew that nobody was stopping him, as he went from the Rhineland to Austria, to the Sudetenland, to the rest of Czechoslovakia, to Poland, to Denmark, to Norway, and finally to our refuge, Holland. It was evil triumphant and seemingly unstoppable.

My own years in Prague were difficult. I lived among people whose language I didn't understand and whose sympathy for German-Jewish refugees was very limited indeed. My school was lousy, and my parents were constantly anxious and nervous. Holland was much better, but the respite was so very brief. We got there in May '38. It took me about a year, I think, to get comfortable. So, let us say, by May '39 I felt at home in Amsterdam. The Germans invaded in May '40, and smashed my world to smithereens. The three and a half years before our deportation were awful. It was like being caught in a vise that tightens slowly but inexorably, until, finally, everything that makes life worth living is gone and you wait to be thrown away.

END

